

Visual Materials Session Review 2007

Session #: 207

Session title: “Labor Beat:” Chicago Film Archives and Labor Media

Number of VM Reporters contributing comments: 1

Reporter 1’s VM experience level:

Archives Profession: 10+ years

VM Specialization: Generalist w/ significant VM

Speakers:

Alan Stein (chair), Nancy Watrous (Chicago Film Archives), Mirko Popadic (MIR Productions), Larry Duncan (Labor Beat/Committee for Labor Access), Jerry Mead-Lucero (Labor Express Radio)

Description from program:

On May 1, 1886, Chicago unionists, reformers, anarchists, and ordinary workers combined to make the city the center of the national movement for an Eight Hours Day. Hundreds of public demonstrators were arrested, and the subsequent trial is now considered one of the worst miscarriages of justice in American history. Popadic has captured the meaning and significance of Haymarket by documenting the Chicago Labor movement since the 1970s. Veteran Chicago-area filmmakers and archivists reflect on the character and heritage of labor television in the digital age. For 20 years, “Labor Beat” (among the first shows produced on cable) has provided comprehensive documentation of the labor movement from the viewpoint of the rank-and-file worker. The Chicago Film Archives was formed in 2003 to house and preserve the Chicago Public Library’s collection of 5,500 16mm films, including lost or neglected industrial and documentary labor films.

Summary of session:

This session was all about the content: documenting the Labor Movement in Chicago, focusing on film, television and a radio show (ie no print). The archivist from the Chicago Film Archives showed a clip from an educational film about race relations in industry. Dating from the 1940s, the film was sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews and was meant to foster team building and good race relations in the work place.

The documentary filmmaker showed a clip of his documentary-in-progress about the legacy of Haymarket. He is pulling together this documentary from footage that he has been shooting for 20 years or so.

The co-producer of “Labor Beat” showed clips of shows from the collection that showed the variety of topics covered. “Labor Beat,” a series that began in 1986, claims to be one of the first cable TV shows. The co-producer is looking for a home for the whole collection of shows.

The disc jockey from the radio show, Labor Express, talked about his show as the labor movement’s access to the media. The future of the show is uncertain and he was also looking for a home for the radio show’s collection.

Session strengths:

The major strength of the session was the film clips. The speakers kept their comments short and the audience watched film and television clips that were quite powerful.

How effectively did the session address the topic as proposed in the program?

The session was far more specific (4 ways or examples of how the labor movement is documented in Chicago) than the description would lead one to believe.

Toward what experience-level was session geared?

General audience. Archivists at all experience levels could take away good information from this session.

What topics (broached or implied) merit further development in future sessions or articles?

None or not applicable. This session worked well as a contained entity.